A Sense of the Green
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One of the burdens of living in Cook County, Illinois — Chicago — is that no one gets out of jury duty. And, of course, there is our reputation for political corruption and greed. Two of our ex-governors are in the penitentiary. But we do jury duty right — and the last time I did it, it was the week of the Fourth of July and it could not have been more inconvenient.

Along with several hundred other citizens I showed up at the County Court Building at 9:30 Monday morning. Groups of 60 were selected by lot and assigned to a case. My group, as diverse as the city itself, crowded into one of the many small courtrooms. For the rest of the day we were questioned by the judge, an African-American woman who presided with dignity, patience, and an obvious commitment to this tedious process. The prosecuting attorney was there, and the defense attorney, and the defendant, a young man accused of murder. The process took all day, until 12 were selected and four alternates, and the rest of us were sent home at 7:15pm.

The experience first irritated and then moved me deeply. It was a nuisance, to be sure, an unwelcome interruption to an already busy week — which, frankly, I tried to avoid. So did most of the people I talked to that day — to no avail. In fact, the man in charge of the several hundred of us prospective jurors rather enjoyed explaining that in Cook County, Illinois, no one gets out of jury duty, not even priests or nuns, he said, and everyone chuckled. And then to demonstrate his point, he asked us to raise our hands: physicians, professors, attorneys, there was even another judge among us. We were an astounding cross section: retired grandparents, cocktail waitress, homemaker, graduate students, construction worker, nun — all of us there to assure that one of us, accused of a terrible crime received the fullest attention society could generate, and absolute fairness in this procedure which would determine ultimately whether he spent decades of his young life in prison, or walked away, a free man. I was moved by that — by what it says about the inherent value of his young life, this incredible investment of time and resources to assure that one of us, indeed one who did not seem to have much going for him, was

not finally a discard, a throw-away – but worthy of something like our best.

That moved me: that hundreds of us show up at the County Court Building every morning, that the same man makes the same speech about no one getting out of this, not even the clergy (and believe me I tried it). After the annoyance and the good-natured complaining came a deep pride that we really are in this together, all of us: that when the chips are down we are, and must be, responsible for one another: that there is, in this nation, from its very beginnings, and in its modern complexity — a realization of and commitment to the General Welfare, the Common Good.

A Sense of the Green, I am calling it, from the Green at the center of the old New England town, that grassy field in the center, at the heart, the Commons, it was sometimes called. Owned by all, available to all, where sheep could graze and children play, an eloquent symbol that the town, the community, exists not only for the individual benefit of its citizens, but for the General Welfare — for which each and everyone has responsibility.

The Founders wrote it into the Constitution, by the way. A dozen years after the Declaration of Independence, which we remembered this week, and the war that ensued, delegates to the Continental Congress returned to Philadelphia, and the Pennsylvania State House – Independence Hall – to write a Constitution to allow their experiment in representative democracy actually to work. They had to do it this time without the eloquence of Thomas Jefferson who was the new Republic's Ambassador to France. James Madison was their intellectual and spiritual leader this time. Together, in the remarkable Preamble, they said:

"We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the General Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution."

Did you hear it, tucked in between the routine functions of government, like establishing justice, and providing for common defense – the first and foundational priority – "to form a more perfect union" and the huge political, social, almost spiritual aspiration to promote something they called "the General Welfare"?

The concept has not always fared well. The people who wrote the words were all men and it didn't occur to them that women were included. That would take a couple of centuries. They were slave owners. They actually discussed it and determined that, at that time, slaves were not included in the General Welfare. It took a hundred years to resolve it and another hundred years to extend the equal and full protection of the law and we are still paying the price for that early and ongoing mistake and still struggling with the effects of continuing racism.

But "promoting the General Welfare," a sense of the Green, may have been their best idea. It is certainly a provocative one; that each of us, individually, has something to do with, some responsibility for, the welfare of all: that there is here a community that is diminished and injured when any one of us citizens is diminished and injured.

A friend of mine was part of a venture to sail across the Atlantic tracing Columbus's initial route. He told me that the boat was cumbersome and that all were committed to remaining under sail the entire time – so unable to guarantee that it could turn 180 degrees. So the passengers and crew had to sign a statement agreeing that if they fell overboard, the boat would not be "coming about" to pick them up.

That's one way to run a sailboat, or an organization, or a nation. but we have trouble with that notion here because we are not willing to relegate anyone of us to that kind of dispensability, insignificance: We will go to great lengths to bring the boat about, because in our founding document is something called The General Welfare.

Where did they get that idea? Well, partly it came out of the Enlightenment, and before that the Renaissance and the Reformation: the radical concept that the individual human being matters, has potential and inherent dignity and worth and rights and responsibilities in relationship to other members of the community.

But long before that it comes from the great prophetic tradition and literature of Ancient Israel: concern for the poor, the marginal, the weak, the widows and orphans, the elderly. Centuries before the Common Era; almost three millennia before 1776, a Hebrew prophet named Amos declared, in the name of God:

“I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.
Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.

I will have no regard for them.
Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream (Amos 5: 21-24)

Another prophet, Micah, suggested that the founding principal of both religion and society, and in his time they were both the same thing, was not what people thought: not getting the rituals and sacrifices right, or the creeds stated with orthodox precision…not at all:

With what shall I come before the Lord
and bow down before the exalted God? Micah asked
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn

And then, Micah gets to the point. It’s none of this –

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

The other part of the story of Israel’s ancient prophets is that they were consistently in trouble with the authorities. They weren’t just preaching to the faithful when they clamored about justice, for the poor, and the weights on the scales in the marketplace, and the privileged enjoying their affluence while trampling on the poor, they were addressing the King and the ruling class. And so they were in trouble, kicked out, thrown in prison, probably accused of “class warfare.”

The first recorded public words of Jesus were spoken on the Sabbath in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. He read the words of the prophet Isaiah

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And then he made the mistake of saying, “Today the scripture has been fulfilled.” This stuff is for real. This is how we are supposed to be living together in community – caring for one another, paying particular attention to those on the margins, the weakest, most vulnerable.

And if you know anything about the New Testament you know that what happened next is that the good folk of Nazareth didn’t like it a bit, didn’t like to be reminded of their own founding principles, and got so angry at the young man, one of their own, that they hauled him out of the building and tried to throw him off a cliff.

Advocating for the General Welfare, calling to account the powers that be – the King in Ancient Israel, the government, the school board, the church – can be risky business. It can land you in trouble. Reminding people of their responsibilities for the welfare of all is not always popular.

Strange how dismissively we use the word “welfare.” In fact, it’s popular to criticize public welfare, welfare departments, welfare workers. No one wants to call the United States of American a “welfare state,” even though our founders understood that the “General Welfare” is what a government is for.

The concept itself sometimes clashes with another important idea: that I need to take care of numero uno: that my concern first and perhaps exclusively, is with me and mine: that if everyone simply took care of himself or herself, was responsible for him or herself, everything else would fall into place. If people fall overboard, or fall behind, too bad, but unavoidable.

The Affordable Health Care Act may not be the best bill. It may be altered – but we are having a national conversation about health care for all, because deep in our DNA, in our national conscience, is a commitment to the General Welfare.

In the preface to her new book, When I Was A Child I Read Books, Marilynne Robinson cites something Walt Whitman wrote in 1870,

in the aftermath of the civil War, a particularly nasty time politically, when the nation was badly divided. Whitman wrote:

“America, if eligible at all to downfall and ruin, is eligible within herself, not without; for I see clearly that the combined foreign world could not beat her down. But these savage, wolfish parties alarm me. Owning no law but their own will, more and more combative, less and less tolerant of the idea of ensemble and of equal brotherhood, the perfect equality of the States, the ever-over-arching American ideas, it behooves you to convey yourself implicitly to no party, nor submit blindly to their dictates, but steadily hold yourself judge and master over all of them.”

Whitman said that 140 years ago, long before the current political polarization, the advent of television attack ads, which sadly, work, and even more sadly both parties are investing heavily in producing.

And yet, Whitman was not entirely pessimistic:

“It is the fashion to decry the whole formulation of the active politics of America, as beyond redemption, and to be carefully kept away from. See you that you do not fall into this error. America, it may be, is doing very well upon the whole, notwithstanding these antics of the parties and their leaders, these half-brain'd nominees, the many ignorant ballots, and many elected failures and blatherers.”

Robinson takes comfort that the country came through the low period of Civil War and aftermath – since, she says, “we now live in a political environment characterized by wolfishness and filled with blather.”

She is concerned that we seem to have forgotten one another, the General Welfare, the sense of the green. “Certain among us have turned on our heritage, the country that has emerged out of generations of attention to public education, public health, public safety, access to suffrage, equality under law.”

“The return to traditional values to some means a punitive severity toward the vulnerable among us, and the establishment of a religious monoculture we have never had and our institutions have never encouraged.”

Robinson worries that our great public education system is being starved and abandoned…that the economics of the moment is corrosive to our best and highest ideals, and it is hard not to come to that conclusion when we invest twice as much in the education fo a child whose family lives in Lake Forest as a child born in a Chicago Housing Authority project..

Distinguished scholar of Theology and Biblical literature, Walter Brueggemann, wrote a book Journey to the Common Good, in which he proposes that:

“The great crisis among us is the crisis of the common good, the sense of community solidarity that binds all in a common destiny – haves and have nots, the rich and the poor.”

According to Brueggemann, “Mature people, at their best, are people who “are committed to the common good that reaches beyond private interest, transcends sectarian commitment and offers solidarity”

Religion, sadly, can be and often is a force contrary to the Common Good. Harvard’s Robert Putnam, and David Campbell, professor at Notre Dame, have collaborated in a fine book, American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us. Just as the book was published, we were in the midst of some very real religious nastiness and controversy. There was a huge public outcry at a proposal to build an Islamic center in lower Manhattan, near Ground Zero – most of it coming from religious spokespersons and a few politicians who tried to exploit religious suspicion and exclusiveness for their own purpose. And – a self-appointed pastor of a tiny Baptist congregation in Florida announced that he planned to burn copies of the Koran, a bizarre incident that was deeply offensive to Muslims and to many of us as well, and turned into an international crisis.

Lots of human misery and lots of human blood has been shed in the name of God. The disastrous Thirty Years War in Europe was the backdrop to the thinking of the 18th century American philosopher-politicians who decided that in their new Republic there would be no established, state-supported religion.

Nevertheless, religion has done its share of dividing us. Putman and Campbell remind us that there was a time not long ago when many American Protestants regarded Roman Catholics with no

more charity than that Florida preacher regards Muslims. In the 19th century an angry Protestant mob in Boston destroyed a Catholic convent. In Philadelphia, a rumor that Catholics wanted to rid public schools of the Bible stirred up such mob violence that two dozen people died and two churches were destroyed.

9/11 taught us that religion still carries deadly potential within, although we know that there was much more to it than religion.

One of my favorite poems is by the late Phyllis McGinley:

Said Zwingli to Muntzer

(Zwingli and Muntzer were two leaders of the 16th century Protestant Reformation – who disagreed, rigorously and violently with one another over the proper mode of Christian baptism. Zwingli was for sprinkling, Muntzer was for total immersion)

"Said Zwingli to Muntzer
'I'll have to be blunt, sir.
I don't like your version
of Total Immersion
And since God's on my side.

And I'm on the dry side.
You'd better swing ovah
To me and Jehovah'

Cried Muntzer, 'Its schism
Is infant Baptism!
Since I've had a sign, sir
That God's will is mine, sir,
Let all men agree
With Jehovah and me,
Or go to Hell, singly,'
Said Muntzer to Zwingli,

As each drew his sword
On the side of the Lord."

Twenty-first Avenue, in Altoona, Pennsylvania, a railroad town where I grew up in the 1950s was, in retrospect, a microcosm of American religion: its pitfalls and its possibilities. On one side of our modest frame house lived the Esteps, a devout Baptist family with five children, two of whom were about my age. The Esteps

perfectly represented mid-twentieth century evangelicalism. They went to church a lot, twice on Sunday, Wednesday night, and throughout the year to various revival meetings conducted by traveling evangelists. When that happened, they went to church or wherever the revival happened, occasionally in a tent, a tent which itself was exciting. I identified tents with circus lions and tigers and pink cotton candy. Sometimes they took me along. The Esteps neither smoked nor drank and regarded both as serious sins. My parents did both: a lot of both, if truth were told. The Esteps didn't play cards, or go to dances. My companions, Frank and Carol, never went to a movie, of course never took the Lord's name in vain, or even uttered a quiet "hell" or "damn." They didn't even read the Sunday paper. One of my memories is of them sitting on their front porch on Sunday afternoon – not 30 feet from ours – doing nothing, waiting until their parents napped, when I could hand the comic section over to them.

On the other side lived the Shaugnessys, a large Irish Catholic family, who were as devout in their way as were the Baptist Esteps. There were a lot of Shaugnessy children, and like the Esteps the two youngest, John and Francie, were about my age. They went to Mass and Confession, didn't eat meat on Fridays, and their oldest sister, Hilda, was a nun who sometimes came home to visit and was a dramatic sight alighting from the bus and floating up 21st Avenue in her full, long habit, her face hidden.

Mr. Shaugnessy wasn't around much. Like all the other men on the block he worked for the PRR. We saw him only rarely, walking home from work with his lunch pail and cap pulled over his eyes. He was a small man. His wife was – well – large, full of laughter. My father explained that Mr. Shaugnessy spent a lot of time in a tavern which Dad said was all right because every time he spent much time at home, Mrs. Shaugnessy got pregnant again.

In between, we were Presbyterians, without any of the fervor of the Baptists or the dramatic mystery of the Shaugnessys. We were, to put it gently, lukewarm. Which – come to think about it – isn't a bad characterization of Presbyterians generally. We pride ourselves on not getting carried away by our religion, doings things decently and in order. Someone famously characterized us as "God's Frozen People." Anyhow, my parents did all the things the Baptists were forbidden to do: my parents both smoked (turns out the Baptists were right about that!); drank, played cards, took

me to the movies, and we read the Sunday paper. We went to church regularly on Sunday, but we never had a revival or thought we needed one, never got carried away like the Esteps who were always worrying about who was saved, and had I accepted Jesus in my heart? And on both sides of my family there were remnants of anti-Catholicism. We were pretty sure they had it all wrong and my Grandmother McCormick, whose ancestors were Ulster Scots used to assure me that the Catholics were storing guns in the basement of the Cathedral for the day they would try to take over.

Sometimes we got into theological and ecclesiastical discussions in the middle of playing in the alley. The Esteps were certain the Shaugnessys were damned for sure: that going to confession was wrong, way wrong, not eating fish was silly, and all those statues and crossing themselves was idolatry. The Shaugnessys told the Esteps that the First Baptist Church wasn't even a church and that they wouldn't even walk through the door. Almost the only thing the Esteps and Shaugnessys agreed on was that the Presbyterian Buchanans were going straight to hell. It was nice that they could agree on something, and come to think about it, it's reminiscent of Rick Santorum's early coalition of conservative Catholics and Right Wing Protestant Evangelicals.

I knew one Jewish classmate and no Muslims, Buddhists, in fact no African-American or Hispanic or Asians. It was the 1950s, the decade Robert Putnam says was the end of something and the beginning of something altogether new – an earthquake was about to happen that would change everything.

The 1960s hit American culture and American religion like a giant earthquake. Everything that was nailed down came loose. Civil Rights, Feminism, the pill, the sexual revolution, Vietnam and the whole anti-war/peace movement, rock & roll, the emergence of a real counter culture. People's thinking about sex changed dramatically. Putnam reports that in the 50s, 80% of American people thought that premarital sex was always wrong. By the end of the 60s those percentages had reversed. Now only 20% say premarital sex is wrong.

The earthquake set off two counter shocks. Conservative Evangelical Christians pushed back in the name of family values, traditional values, and patriotism. And when that became harnessed to politics the moral majority and religious right emerged as a new and very real political force. The relentless

attacks on feminism, abortion rights, and homosexuality gained a real head of steam – but then, Putnam and Campbell says, came the second after shock. Young people turned off: appalled at the Christianity they heard and saw on television, they dropped out of the churches in unprecedented numbers.

But things are changing. We seem to be moving away from exclusive religion to something far more inclusive. The issues that fired the right and left thirty year ago are simply not issues for young adults. Every time I go to a meeting in which Presbyterians will fight once again over gender orientation and the ordination of Gay and Lesbian Christians, my kids, all five of them, say, “Dad! Are you still talking about that?”

Even more remarkably we seem to be softening on the most basic issues of all, exclusive truth claims that result in exclusive behavior that divides and alienates and sometimes tragically results in violence. If I have the truth and you do not, the best thing I can do for you is convince you to stop thinking the way you think and think like me: stop being who you are and become like me. On occasion, tragically, that kind of thinking led to the conclusions that I can marginalize you, isolate you, torture you, burn you at the stake, blow you up, for the purity of the community

That’s changing. Part of it, I think, is because the whole matter of truth has so expanded with modern science, cosmology, astronomy, and physics. Today, more than at any time in the past 200 years, we are aware of what we do not know. Truth is bigger than we can understand or imagine. Mystery, which was the formative context for religion in the beginning, has made a big and welcome comeback. We have learned again to say, “I don’t know. I’m not sure about that.”

In religion the form the question takes is, “Who is going to heaven?”

Remarkably, conservative evangelicals, who used to be pretty sure who was getting in and who was not, are today less sure. Something like 75 or 80% of evangelicals says that a non-Christian, a member of another faith, could go to heaven.

Putnam tells a funny story about a meeting of Missouri Synod Lutheran bishops. The Missouri Synod has always been pretty sure heaven is reserved for Missouri Synod Lutherans. A recent survey

of lay people turned up a surprising result – a majority of Missouri Synod lay people thought non-Lutherans could get in. The bishops were devastated and spent the rest of the meeting feeling guilty over their obvious failure.

It's the "Aunt Susan principal," Putnam says. We have become such a diverse culture that the average American knows two people of another faith. And it just doesn't seem right to tell your friends that they're going to hell. And everyone has an Aunt Susan, a sweet, kind, generous aunt, who doesn't go to church, doesn't believe a thing – and it is simply not possible to imagine Aunt Susan burning in hell.

We are all in this together, even in an election year when our convictions and commitments seem sometimes to polarize use.

As I monitor the national debate and prepare to vote my convictions, my beliefs, I'm going to try to remember that we've been through times of rancor and name-calling before that the Republic survived and then did it again in four years.

I'm going to try to remember that it is the job of religion in this free and diverse society, not to try to dictate or dominate, but to remind us of our highest ideas, deepest values – "the better angels of our nature." Abraham Lincoln called it: the we have an obligation to one another, to the weakest and smallest and most vulnerable – children, elders, sick, hungry, poor.

I'm going to try to remember that deep in the DNA of my nation is an impetus to promote the General Welfare – that it is a good and noble impetus. And I will try to do what I can to uphold it, advocate and argue and enable religion to be part of it – the generous, big-hearted love for neighbor, stranger, insider and marginalized, strong and week, old and young – each of us, part of the whole, the community, the common good.

On 21st Avenue, the children all grew up and moved on. My father was the first to die, then Mrs. Estep. So that left Mr. Estep, and my mother. Mr. Estep was a teetotalling, devout, Baptist Deacon. Mother was a Presbyterian. She did the New York Times crossword puzzle every day, including Sunday, smoked a pack or two of Winstons daily,, and at night drank two bottles of Budweiser while she watched The Tonight Show. And then she got sick. The Winstons did it. When Dad died, she learned to drive so she could

get to the Beer store and buy two cases of Budweiser at a time, which the nice young man put in the trunk, and then surreptitiously she retrieved a few bottle at a time from the car parked in the street and put them in the refrigerator. It was a good system until she got sick and couldn't carry the bottles from the trunk to the fridge. I asked, "Mother what are you doing about your bottles of beer." "Oh," she said," I asked Ken Estep to carry them in for me. And he does – a whole case at a time."

Sometimes religion divides us and sometimes, thanks be to God, it unites us.